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# Proposal to Drop "Squaw" from Place Names in Maine: Summary of Issues and Views. 2000

Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission

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**PROPOSAL TO DROP “SQUAW”  
FROM PLACE NAMES IN MAINE**

**Summary of Issues and Views by the  
Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission**

**January 2000**

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## The Proposal

To many Wabanaki people and other people of Maine, as well as people throughout the country and beyond, the word “squaw” is highly offensive. On behalf of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (MITSC), Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Donald Soctomah has introduced LD 2418 to the 119th Maine Legislature to prohibit the use of the word in place names in Maine.

In 1976, Representative Gerald Talbot of Portland sponsored legislation, enacted as Public Law 1977, Chapter 259, to remove offensive names from places in Maine. This law states that an offensive name is “a name of a place which includes the designation ‘nigger’ as a separate word or as part of a word” and prohibits its use as a place name.

LD 2418 amends this law by adding “squaw” as an offensive name and prohibiting its use. Under both the current law and the proposed bill, there is no legal obligation for a business to change its name. However, geographic features; streets, alleys or other roads; and political subdivisions may not include the designation “nigger” (current law) or “squaw” (proposed bill), and these names must be changed by “reasonable actions” of the municipal officers of a municipality or the county commissioners responsible for unorganized territory. Any person who believes that a place has an offensive name may file a complaint with the Maine Human Rights Commission. (Over the past five years, the Commission has noticed an increase in complaints about the word “squaw” and mascots based on Native American images.)

## Maine Places That Are Affected See Attachment #1

In Maine, there are twenty-five known geographic features in seven counties with the word “squaw” or “squa”:

County	# of Geographic Features
Aroostook	6 features with “squa”
Cumberland	1 feature with “squaw”
Franklin	1 feature with “squaw”
Penobscot	1 feature with “squaw”
Piscataquis	12 features with “squaw”
Waldo	2 features with “squaw”
Washington	2 features with “squaw”

Twelve of these features are in Piscataquis County and six are in Aroostook County. Seven of the features in Piscataquis County and three of the features in Aroostook County are located totally or partially in Maine Public Reserve Land. Two of the features are in Indian Territory located in Franklin and Penobscot Counties.

It is not known how many streets, alleys, and roads have the name “squaw” or “squa.” MITSC has asked the U.S. Postal Service for a computer print-out of streets in Maine with this name.

## Legislative History in Maine

1976. During the floor debate on Representative Talbot’s bill 24 years ago, the word “squaw” was questioned, and several legislators stated that it was offensive to the Native people of Maine.

1997. In early 1997, then-Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Fred Moore introduced LD 955 to the First Regular Session of the 118th Maine Legislature. The bill authorized the Passamaquoddy Joint Tribal Council to change the names of geographic features within their Indian Territory from offensive names to appropriate prediscovery names. MITSC supported the bill, but it did not pass the Judiciary Committee. LD 955 was one of a package of five Passamaquoddy bills before the Committee. Several of the bills were very complex, and the State and the Tribes had very different perspectives about them. While LD 955 was not complicated or controversial, the others were. Four of the bills (including LD 955) were killed, and the fifth bill was tabled until the Second Regular Session.

Legislation that did pass was Resolves 1977, Chapter 45, which required MITSC to undertake a systematic review of the civil laws of Maine over a period of four years. The resolve required MITSC to review the concerns of the Passamaquoddy Tribe which led to them to introduce their package of legislation during the First Regular Session.

1998. As MITSC began its review of the civil laws, there was quick agreement that changing geographic names in Passamaquoddy Territory should happen and should not require extensive discussion. Thus, LD 1953 was the first recommendation for legislation to emerge from MITSC's review of civil laws. The bill recognized the right of the Passamaquoddy Tribe to change the names of geographic features within its Indian Territory. To make sure everyone would be aware of any name changes, the bill also required the State to assist the Tribe in notifying the necessary entities to accomplish the name changes in official maps and documents.

In discussing this legislation, MITSC learned that there is a lot of concern among tribal members about certain place names outside of Indian Territory. MITSC understood that the name "squaw" was highly offensive. Thus, LD 1953 directed MITSC to review tribal concerns about the use of offensive names for geographic features outside of Indian Territory and to report back to the Legislature with recommendations for name changes.

The Judiciary Committee voted "ought to pass" on an amended version of LD 1953, which addressed only place names within Passamaquoddy Territory. During the discussion about the bill, it was noted that MITSC did not need legislation in order to review concerns about place names beyond Indian Territory. The amended version of the bill passed and was signed into law on April 1, 1998 (Public Law 1997, Chapter 650.)

1999. During MITSC's March 1999 meeting, the Chairperson Cushman Anthony reported that the American Indian Movement had raised concerns about the use of word "squaw", and that Governor Angus King asked MITSC to look into the matter. Passamaquoddy and Penobscot members of MITSC initially confirmed that this term is highly offensive to many tribal members.

Some debate followed about the extent to which "squaw" is offensive. Some contended that the term just means an Indian woman. Many others insisted that the term is highly insulting and derogatory, meaning whore or a woman's private parts. MITSC heard several tribal members state that "squaw" is hurtful and hateful to them, just as the term "nigger" is hurtful and hateful to Black people.

MITSC voted unanimously to draft legislation to eliminate "squaw" from place names and attempted to have this introduced to the Second Regular Session of the 119th Maine Legislature. The Legislative Council initially failed by one vote to accept Representative Soctomah's bill (then LR 3466) into the Second Regular Session of the 119th Legislature. On appeal, however, the Council voted 9-0 to allow the bill into the session.

## **What's Happening Beyond Maine?**

In 1995, Minnesota enacted a law to rename any natural geographic places identified by the word "squaw." In 1999, the State of Montana enacted a law that requires state agencies to identify all geographic features and places using the term "squaw"; to remove the term when updating or replacing maps, signs, or markers; and to provide for the appointment of an advisory group to develop replacement names.

The Washington State Board on Geographic Names is gradually working to address the issue. The board has approved a change in the name of Squaw Creek near Yakima to an Indian name, *Lmuma*, which means old woman. Of the 33 geographic features in the State that bear this name, the worst example is Squaw Tit Hill. The board is in the process of changing that to another word favored by the local tribe, *P'ushtay*, which means red peak.

In Arizona, two 16-year old Indian girls tried in 1997 to change the name of Squaw Peak, located near Phoenix. Their efforts were not successful. They appealed to the Arizona Board on Geographic Names, using documents which contained research on the origin of “squaw” and how this mountain came to be named. The documents indicate that Arizona has 70 place names using the word, including Squaw Tit and Squa Tits.

In North Carolina, an agreement was reached in March 1999 between the U.S. Department of Justice and the Buncombe County Board of Education to remove offensive imagery. Among other things, the agreement called for Erwin High School to stop using the word “Squaws” to refer to its female sports teams.

In Saskatchewan, Canada, there were efforts in 1988 to change the name of a hydro-electric generating station called Squaw Rapids. The name was changed.

## Dictionary Definitions of “Squaw”

See Attachment #2 for dictionary definitions of “squaw.”

The first meaning of “squaw” listed in the Oxford English Dictionary is “a North American Indian woman or wife.” The earliest cited use of this definition is in the year 1634. Another meaning listed by this dictionary is “an effeminate or weak person”.

Three different editions of Webster’s and Miriam-Webster’s dictionaries, published from 1983 until 1999, recognize that the term has become more offensive over time:

- ⇒ In 1983, the first definition of “squaw” is “an American Indian woman or wife” and the second is “any woman: chiefly humorous.”
- ⇒ In 1993, the first definition is “an American Indian woman” and the second is “woman, wife--usually used disparagingly.”
- ⇒ In 1999, the first definition is “*often offensive*: an American Indian woman” and the second is “*usually disparaging*: woman, wife.”

At least two other dictionaries—the American Heritage Dictionary and the Cambridge Dictionary of American English—also identify “squaw” as offensive.

## Roots of “Squaw”

See Attachments #2 and #3 for definitions and views about the etymology of “squaw.”

“Squaw” did not originate from the Wabanaki people living in what is now Maine and the Maritimes. The Maliseet, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot languages denote the female gender of a thing with a suffix, and speakers of these languages say that “squaw” is not a word in their tongue.

The Oxford English Dictionary refers to “Narragansett Indian squaws, Massachusetts *squa*, with related forms in many other Algonquin dialects”; the earliest cited use of the term is in 1634. Miriam Webster dictionaries also refer to “Massachuset *squa*, *ussqua*” and the year 1634. One of the editions of Webster’s refers to Massachusetts Indian *squa*, *wshqua*; Narragansett *squ[<sup>a</sup>]ws*; and Delaware *ochqueu* and *khqueu*. Most academicians agree with this description of the roots of the word and agree that the native word meant woman or wife or female with no negative connotation.

There is more debate about the Mohawk word “otsikwaw.” Some believe it meant female genitalia. Some believe that this is false etymology.

## **What “Squaw” Means Today** See Attachment #4 for views about what “squaw.” means today.

Consistent with the dictionary definitions of “squaw”, there is a high degree of consensus--though not 100%--that the word has a derogatory meaning today. Most Native people believe that “squaw” has a disparaging meaning, and many view it as a fighting word that delivers the message that Native women are promiscuous and objects of public vilification. Some older Native people find the word so derogatory, that they have not been able to talk about it. Academicians, most of whom seem to believe that the original native forms of the word were neutral, generally agree that “squaw” rapidly came to have a negative, disrespectful, and insulting meaning in its English use.

## **Views about Dropping “Squaw” from Place Names** See Attachment #5

Some Native people do not support dropping “squaw” from place names. Some do not think the word is especially offensive. Others believe that the word has become insulting through its use in the English language, but believe that Native people should reclaim the word with pride and ask that everyone use the word with respect.

Members of the general public often are surprised to learn that “squaw” is an offensive word. Some think this debate is simply about political correctness. In the Greenville area, where so many geographic features have the name “squaw”, there is considerable opposition to changing this name.

However, it appears that most Native people believe that the word should be dropped from place names. All five tribal governments in Maine—the Aroostook Band of Micmac Indians, the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Motahkokmikuk (Indian Township), the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayik (Pleasant Point), and the Penobscot Nation—have signed a resolution in support of the removal of the word “squaw.”

In addition, many non-Native people believe that “squaw” should be eliminated from place names. Among the non-Native groups in Maine that support dropping the name are the Catholic Diocese of Maine, Friends Committee on Maine Public Policy, Hall-Dale Middle School Civil Rights Team, Holocaust Human Rights Center, Maine Civil Liberties Union, Maine Committee on Indian Relations of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, Maine Chapter of the NAACP, Maine Council of Churches, Maine Human Rights Commission, Maine Women’s Lobby, National Coalition Building Institute, and others.

## LIST OF KNOWN GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES WITH THE NAME “SQUAW” OR “SQUA”

Based on “USGS Geographic Names Information System”  
and “The Maine Atlas and Gazetteer” by Delorme

### Aroostook County

Squapan Twp.	entire township
Squa Pan Lake, Ashland, Masardis,	great pond
Squapan Twp., T11 R4 WELS <sup>abuts</sup> *	
Squa Pan Inlet, Castle Hill, T11 R4 WELS <sup>partially</sup> *	stream
Squa Pan Stream, Masardis	stream
Squa Pan Knob (Mountain), Squapan Twp. *	summit
Squa Pan, Ashland, Masardis	location

### Cumberland County

Squaw Island, Standish	island in Sebago Lake
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### Franklin County

Squaw Pond, Lowelltown Twp. <sup>+</sup>	pond under 10 acres in Passamaquoddy Territory; renamed by Passamaquoddy Tribe
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### Penobscot County

White Squaw Island, Greenbush Twp. <sup>^</sup>	part of Penobscot Reservation, Penobscot River
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### Piscataquis County

Big Squaw Twp.	entire township
Little Squaw Twp.	entire township
Big Squaw Mountain, BST <sup>partially</sup> *	summit, elev. 3,196
Little Squaw Mountain, LST *	summit
Big Squaw Pond, LST *	great pond
Little Squaw Pond, LST *	great pond
Squaw Brook, BST, LST *	stream
Little Squaw Brook, LST *	stream
Middle Squaw Brook, BST <sup>partially</sup> *	stream
Squaw Bay, Moosehead Lake, BST	bay
Squaw Point, Moosehead Lake, BST	point
Squaw's Bosom, T3 R11 WELS	doubletop summit, elev. 3,030

### Waldo County

Squaw Head, Stockton Springs	island in Penobscot Bay
Squaw Point, Stockton Springs	point on Cape Jellison

### Washington County

Squaw Cap, Lubec	summit
Squaw Island, No. 21 Township	island in Big Lake

<sup>+</sup> Located in Passamaquoddy Territory; renamed by Passamaquoddy Tribe

<sup>^</sup> Part of Penobscot Reservation in Penobscot River

\* Located in Maine Public Reserve Land

BST=Big Squaw Twp.

LST=Little Squaw Twp.

## DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF “SQUAW”

### The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary

© Oxford University Press 1971

Squaw -[a. Narragansett Indian squaws, Massachusetts squa, woman, with related forms in many other Algonquin dialects.]

1. A North American Indian woman or wife.  
**1634** - W. Wood *New England Prosp.* II XIX. If her husband come to seeke for his Squaw. **1652** - J. Wilson in *Progr. Gosp among indians* 18 The *Saneps* or men by themselves and the *Squaes* or women by themselves. 1672 - Josselyn *New Eng. Rarities* 99 The Indian Squa, or Female Indian. **1701** - Wolley *Jrnl. New York* (1860) to their squaws or Wives and Female Sex manage their Harvest. **1756** - Washington *Jrnl. Writ.* 1889 I. 401 Captn. Pear is came to town the other day with six Cherokees and two squaws. **1836** - *Backwoods Canada* 160 The Indians are very expert in ... fishing; the squaws paddling the canoes with admirable skill. **1877** - G. Glass *Tribes W. Washington* 193 The prairies are dotted over with squaws, each armed with a sharp stake and a basket.
- b. Applied by Indians to white women.  
**1642** - Lechford *Plain Deeling* 49 And when they {sc. Indians} see any of our English women sewing with their needles, or working quoife, or such things, they will crie out, Lasie *squaes*! **1837** - W. Irving *Capt. Bonnerville* III. 147 They...were especially eloquent about the white squaws.
- c. In general use: a wife or spouse. *rare*.  
**1803** - Byron *Juan* XIII. Ixxix. Mrs. Rabbi, the rich banker's squaw.
2. Used as *adj.* Female. *Obs.*<sup>-1</sup>  
**1634** - W. Wood *New England's Prosp.* II IV. They posted to the English to tell them how the case stood or hung with their squaw horse.
3. transf. An effeminate or weak person.  
**1807** - Pike *Sources Mississ* (1810) 20 I directed my interpreter to ask how many scalps they had taken. they replied 'none'; he added they were all squaws, for which I reprimanded him. c. **1890** - A. Wellker *Tales West* 24 By way of expressing their utter contempt for him they called him a 'squaw'.
4. *Old squaw*, the long-tailed duck.  
**1884** - E.P. Roz *Nat. Ser. Story* vi. There is an old squaw, or long tailed duck. **1894**
5. attrib., as squaw-axe, dance, hitch, mistress; squaw-man, a white (or negro) who marries a North American Indian woman; squaw-sachem, a squaw chief in certain American Indian tribes; squaw winter, a short spell of winter-like weather which frequently precedes the Indian summer of Canada and the northern United States.  
**1896** - *Harpers Mag* XCII. 707/t Such a settler..., watching his chance, fell on his captors..and slew them with a "squaw-axe. **1894** - *Outing* XXIV. 83/t The short, choppy stepping of most "squaw dances elsewhere. c. **1901** - A. Adams *Log Cowboy* iii, He showed me what he called a 'squaw hitch, with which you can lash a pack single-handed. **1884** - *Pall Mall G.* 26 Aug (Encycl. D.) The squaw-man-the miserable wretch of European blood who married a Crow or a Blackfoot in order to take up land in the Indian Reservation. **1894** - *Outing* XXIV. 87/2 A negro squaw-man (that is one having an Indian wife) who went by the name of 'Smoky'. **1707** - In *Sewall Diary* (1879) II. 60. She sent then unto a French Priest, that he would speak unto her "Squa Mistress. **1622** - *Relat. Plantation Plymouth, New Eng.* 57 Also the 'Squa Sachim or Massachusetts Queen was an enemy to him. **1726** - B. Church. *Hist. Philips War* (1865) I. 6 Amongst the rest he sent Six Men to Awashonks Squaw-Sachem of the Sogkonate Indians, to engage her in his Interests. **1901** - in *Cont. Dict. Suppl.* (1909) s.v. Winter, 'Squaw winter is giving us a good long visit.

**Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd Edition**  
© Simon & Schuster 1983

squaw, n. [Am. Ind.]  
1. an American Indian woman or wife  
2. any woman: chiefly humorous

**Miriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition**  
© Merriam-Webster, Incorporated 1993

squaw n. [Massachuset *squa*, *ussqua* woman] (1634)  
1. an American Indian woman  
2. Woman, wife--usually used disparagingly

**Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary**  
© MICRA, Inc. 1998, 1996

squaw, n. [Massachusetts Indian *squa*, *wshqua*; Narragansett *squ*[<sup>a</sup>]ws; Delaware *ochqueu* and *khqueue*]; also used in compound words (as the names of animals) in the sense of female] A female; a woman--in the language of Indian tribes of the Algonquin family, correlative of *sannup* (a married male American Indian).

**WWWebster Dictionary**  
© Merriam-Webster, Incorporated 1999

Main Entry: squaw    Pronunciation: 'skwo    Function: noun  
Etymology: Massachuset *squa*, *ussqua* woman    Date: 1634  
1. *often offensive* : an American Indian woman  
2. *usually disparaging* : woman, wife

**American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd Edition**  
© Houghton Mifflin Company 1996, 1992

squaw *n. Offensive*  
1. A Native American woman, especially a wife  
2. A woman or wife  
[Massachusett *squa*, *younger woman*]

**Cambridge Dictionary of American English**  
© Cambridge University Press 1999

squaw, n. a Native American woman, esp. a wife. This word is considered offensive by many people.

## ETYMOLOGY (ROOTS) OF "SQUAW"

### Iroquois Language Internet Discussion

Sponsored by the University of Toronto

Blair Rudes <BARudes@AOL.com> 5/21/99

The word squaw was originally taken from one of the New England Algonquian languages (Massachuset, Narragansett, Mohegan, Pequot, Quiripi, Nipmuck, or Pocumtuck--probably one of the first two) that Europeans first encountered, where it was the word for woman...The word remains in use today with the meanings of woman and wife in the Northern New England Algonquian languages (Western Abenaki, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet.) It appears in the early writings of people like Eliot, well before English speakers had significant contact with the Mohawk (the purported source of the false etymology to female genitalia.) Because of the low-esteem given women in general by Europeans and their "less than human" view of Native Americans, the word rapidly came to have negative meaning."

Sandy Sunderland <waisicuwim@Bigfoot.com> 5/21/99

In Lenape the word *xkwa* (squaw) means woman..You may check with tribal historian Jim Rementer in Dewey OK. In Narragansett the word means "woman". This has been confirmed by their tribal historian. Jesse Bruchac who has become quite fluent in Abenaki, having spent many years studying with an elder will be happy to explain that in his language and several other Wabanaki tongues, squaw means woman and is a word of great power. In several of these languages the word is suffixed on to a woman's name to indicate gender in the same way that the Lakota suffix "win" to a woman's name. It is also used to refer to the female of various animal species. The noted Saconet leader Awashunkeskwa is still remembered as the Squaw-Sachem by Indians in the region of Rhode Island...

A few years ago I had a chance to discuss this "squaw" situation with Mohawk elder Tom Porter who is fluent in the language and is very much involved in efforts to preserve it for future generations. He felt that he may have been responsible for the "misinformation that led to the uproar". He explained that two women interviewed him about a possible source for the word and he did tell them about a derogatory Mohawk word that sounded somewhat similar. He did not feel that the Mohawk word was the origin because it would not have been commonly used. A short time later he was incorrectly quoted in a letter to the editor in "Indian Country Today".

Ted <kitompanisha@valint.net> 5/24/99

Squaw was/is the Narragansett word for woman. *Squawsuck* is the plural. *Squasese* is a little girl. In that the Narragansett referred to the Mohawk as cannibals, it is not surprising that the Mohawk might have adapted the word to a different meaning, being derogatory toward Algonquian women.

### Other Voices

David "Spirit Bear" Walton, Passamaquoddy, reported in *Bangor Daily News*, 3/2/99

Walton cites American Indian Movement material which states that in Algonquin and other American Indian languages, the word "squaw" means vagina. "In the Mohawk language, the word 'otsikwaw' means female genitalia, according to the AIM release. "Mohawk women and men found that early European fur traders shortened the word to 'squaw' because that represented what they wanted from Mohawk women."

Vernon Bellecourt, American Indian Movement, reported in *Moosehead Messenger*, 3/11/99

The word squaw is a corruption of a Mohawk term for female genitalia, according to Bellecourt, who says French settlers are generally attributed for referring to Indian women with this word, which is equated by some with prostitute or whore.

Dr. David Rider, Xavier University, LA, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/11/99

The word squaw derives from an Algonquian word describing female genitalia.

Philip LeSourd, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Indiana University, IN, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/11/99

...The word squaw “has nothing to do with any word for the female genitalia, in Mohawk or in any other language.” Instead, squaw originally meant woman and, more specifically, young woman in the Algonquian language of Massachuset in what is now southeastern Massachusetts, according to LeSourd...LeSourd worked for the Wabanaki Bilingual Education Program at Indian Township in the late 1970s...There is no stand-alone word in more local Indian languages. Maliseet, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot languages denote the female gender of a thing with a suffix, explains LeSourd, and speakers of these languages will say that squaw is not a word in their tongue...

Ives Goddard, Curator, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/11/99

Goddard cites 17th century written documents, including a 1663 Massachuset version of the Bible in which *squa* is translated to be female and that English settlers learned *squa* to mean woman from their Massachuset-speaking neighbors. The resemblance between this word and the last syllable of a Mohawk word meaning vagina is coincidence only, he explains...

Marge Bruchac, Abenaki Missisquoy Band, VT <mbruchac@javanet.com> 8/31 & 9/22/99

...“squaw”...has been translated by non-Algonquian-speaking activists, both Native and non-Native, as a slanderous assault against Native American womanhood. The word was used, occasionally but by no means universally, as sexual slang by a few 19th c. French fur traders in the Great Lakes area. But throughout the northeast, the word has been and continues to be used by traditional Algonquian speakers in its original form. As a suffix, prefix, or standing alone, the word, variously rendered in English a *squaw*, *squa*, *skwa*, *esqua* etc., is a term that descriptively denotes a woman, with no negative connotation implied. For example, in Abenaki *nidobasqua* = a female friend, *manigebeskwa* = woman of the woods, *Squa Sachem* = female chief. English observers described plants that were used by the Indians to heal female problems as squaw vine and squaw root.

...When Roger Williams collected specimens of language from the Narragansett people (see “A Key into the Language of America, 1643), he was informed that squaw meant woman, *squawsuck* = women, *squashim* = a female animal, *keegsquw* = a young virgin or maid and *segousquaw* = a widow, among many other examples. When Abenaki people today sing the Birth Song, they address the *nuncksquassis* the little baby woman. Perhaps the presence of female reproductive equipment is the determining factor, but the prudity of the early European writers prevented any of them from recording the actual word used to indicate vagina. And, incidentally, I have not found any speakers of Wabanaki or northeastern Algonkian languages, in archival dictionaries or contemporary speech, who use the word *squa* in any of its forms to indicate any part of the female anatomy. There are very specific words and word fragments for vagina, womb, etc, none of which bear any resemblance to the word for woman.

In order to understand the true origins of this word, we need to look at the history of the relationship between Native people and the early European settlers. Some settlers were unable to pronounce the correct word used for women and others refused to accept Native women as humans, so they chose to use a slang version of the correct word. The women weren't the only ones being referred to using dehumanizing words. Native men were also referred to as "bucks", as a hunter refers to a male deer. The relations between the early settlers and the Natives quickly turned to warfare. It was during this time period (1650) when this corrupted word started being used to demoralize the Native population. In addition to the physical violence that erupted, came an equally destructive war of words. This was done in an attempt to demoralize the opponent, in this case the Indian people...As the line of settlements advanced, the Iroquois Nations were also seen as being in the way of the settlers and war broke out with them. During this time, the term squaw was also used as a corruption of a longer native word *otsikwaw*, which referred to a female body part. The early fur trappers used the Squaw word to imply the crudest sexual connotations. The war continued in New England for 150 years, but the war of the words has continued for 400 years. The word became engrained in the English language.

## WHAT “SQUAW” MEANS TODAY

Maine Tribal Members, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/11/99

...Donald Soctomah, Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative to the Maine Legislature...says that hearing “squaw, squaw, squaw” in radio and television advertisements “really tears at people trying to strengthen their heritage and culture.” Soctomah says the word has most often been ascribed to Native American females in an angry or racial context to mean female genitalia and insinuate prostitute. He is backed up on this by Wayne Newell, director of the Wabanaki Bilingual Education Program at the Indian Township School, as well as Ann Pardilla, sub-chief of the Penobscot Nation, who both recall squaw as a fighting word.

Furthermore, Vera Francis, spokesperson of the Daughters of First Light, a grassroots organization of Wabanaki women devoted to indigenous women’s empowerment and optimal well-being, says the word as it has come to be used, “delivers the message that native women are sexually dirty, promiscuous and are otherwise objects for public vilification.” Carol Dana, a language teacher at Indian Island School, echoes the opinion of some anthropologists that the term has nothing to do with female genitalia, but that it has come to mean something so derogatory, she recalls, that her grandmother would not tell her what it meant...

Ives Goddard, Curator, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/11/99

They’ve taken a perfectly innocent situation and are trying to make it a debating point for denigrating the Europeans who used the word, says Goddard. “This issue is really not about the etymology of the word. This is a political issue. It’s not based on the technical facts. It’s based on perception.”

Philip Lesourd, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Indiana University, IN, and Conor Quinn, Cornell University, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/11/99

Lesourd acknowledges that Euro-Americans have made squaw into a derogatory and racist term and says those who seek to have it removed from place names have a valid point, saying that “words mean to people what people use them to mean.”

This is echoed by Conor Quinn, linguistics scholar and language consultant at Cornell University. The argument citing the Mohawk word is a dead end, he says, and the real issue is the English word as it is used now, which “runs the gamut from being stereotyping, caricaturing to simply derogatory. That alone should be enough to warrant argument against its use.”

Owner of Big Squaw Mountain Resort, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/19/99

Jim Confalone, who owns the land and the business, sees no reason to change the name. He takes the word to mean the female head of a Native American household, even confers it as a term of endearment on his wife, and says introducing a derogatory interpretation does a disservice not only to the word, but to Native Americans.

Residents of Greenville area, reported in *Moosehead Messenger* 3/19/99

...Madeline “Maddie” Burnham of Greenville, who is half Native American, takes squaw to mean woman of ill repute. However, she and other local Native Americans do not object to the mountain’s

name. She says most people do not consider squaw derogatory and says the mountain is "so familiar, it seems really silly to rename it." A Penobscot, Francis Tomer of Rockwood, considers squaw to be a married woman or -at worst- "someone who really doesn't know what they're talking about." Tomer says, "I don't know why they should change it now because I don't think it's a very bad name. His wife Mariette, A Maliseet, has become aware of the derogatory interpretation only later in life, but says she has no opinion on this issue.

Two other women of non-local, Native American origin now living here, P.J. Tinto and Cathy Craft, do not consider squaw an insult and side with the innocent definition. The same is true of retired librarian Etta Hubbard, who dismisses the issue. "No one ever thought of it as being offensive..."

Catherine Davids <cdavids@flint.umich.edu> 4/9/99

Too many times arguments revolve about "what was" rather than "what is." We can discuss for many days and among many people where the word squaw came from and there will be many opinions and demands for proof and disagreements among ourselves. The reality is that the word has come to be used in a totally disrespectful and demeaning way...

Sandy Sunderland <waisicuwim@Bigfoot.com> 5/21/99

This does not mean that the word has not taken on derogatory connotations as it moved westward and was inappropriately used and abused. When we complain of the word "squaw" it is important to be clear that we are talking about the contemporary derogatory implications and not the original usage in native languages.

David "Spirit Bear" Walton, reported in *Portland Press Herald*, 6/25/99

Still others wonder why this 58 year old man seems so zealous about righting what he sees as a centuries old wrong. The answer can be found in this month's issue of "Norumbega," a newsletter on Indian Affairs that Walton produces...In an editorial...he introduces Jessie Knowles Walton, his mother. It's the story of a girl who was born in northern Maine in 1900 and grew up enduring the taunts of "squaw" and "dirty Indian" from the white children with whom she went to school. A girl who grew up believing what others said--that she *was* a "squaw," and there fore she *was* worthless. She used to powder her hands and face so she could fit in," Walton wrote... "My mother never wanted to talk with us kids about her heritage..." "That's why I'm doing this," Walton finally said, blinking back his tears, "for Jesse."

Gladys B. LePretrre <lepretrrg@unbc.ca> 9/19/99

I see [squaw] as a label of contempt; and other Native American/First Nations/Indian/Native women find this term despicable...Dr. Alice Miller (1979:174-175) wrote a wonderful book: "The Gifted Child." In one chapter, she relates asking Belgian students--post-WWII ages--what they thought of Hitler and his actions during WWII. A lively discussion ensued. The following night in a German town, [with] Post-WWII aged students, the query met with a frozen wall of silence. How could it be, she wondered that these youths who had not lived in the time of Hitler, have such a deep emotional response? She concluded that the taboo was so entrenched, from a sense of shame for their country-man's actions that the parents had communicated this, without words, to their children; thus, eliciting the taboo reaction. That is how deeply embedded the sq--- word is in my mind.

Like Patricia Monture-Angus (1995: 68) "Thunder in My Soul," I too feel this soul-murder which rolls over me "...with such force that I am immobilized,"...this feeling of being devastated, engulfed by paralysis, and suffused with anger. Then, spurred on to action after the anger has subsided, a peaceful knowing occurs in which I realize the extent of the emotional violence to which I have been subjected. I am driven to seek and implement changes so that my two little granddaughters will not have to experience these forms of internalized structural biases.

Donald Soctomah, Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative, reported in *Kennebec Journal*, 11/12/99

Although the origin of the term is not entirely clear, Soctomah said it has become a racial slur and an insult to Indian women that can be loosely translated as “prostitute”. “These are our grandmothers, our mothers, and our wives,” Soctomah said of the women who are belittled by the use of “squaw” in the names of more than a dozen Maine mountains, ponds, islands, and other places. “It’s time for us, instead of knocking our women down, to put them on a pedestal.” Soctomah said having a Squaw Mountain, a Squaw Island, and a Squaw Pond “is like calling a mountain Whore Mountain or a township Whore Township.”...Even if the word has legitimate Indian origins, Soctomah said, “during the last 400 years the word has been corrupted in English eyes and French eyes and everything else.” He said it is now such a scathing insult that, for many Native American women, “it cuts right to the bone of their whole being.”

Richard Hamilton, Chief, Penobscot Nation, reported in *Kennebec Journal*, 11/12/99

Not all Maine Indians agree that the current usage of the term is insulting...“I never considered it offensive,” Hamilton said. He said some of the confusion may stem from the fact that “squaw” is neither a Penobscot word or a Passamaquoddy word, but rather a word that originated with other tribes. Until some Indians began focusing attention on the word’s sometimes negative connotations, Hamilton said, “it was never even mentioned as to whether it was a good word or not. It was just an accepted word” that was synonymous with ‘woman’.

Anne Wood, Penobscot Tribal Member, reported in *Sun Journal* 11/28/99

Anne Wood is embarrassed that the American Indians of her generation have waited until now to try to remove the insult “squaw” from the names of mountains, streams, ponds, points and islands. “I never even questioned the idea that it could be changed, said Wood, a Penobscot who felt powerless when she spent her childhood on the Indian Island reservation in Old Town. “We, as Indians didn’t have much say in anything...When I grew up it was a word that made you kind of cringe,” Wood said. She used to be angered when Old Town kids called her “squaw” at school.

Penobscot Tribal Representative Donna Loring, reported in *Sun Journal* 11/28/99

If you go onto a reservation and call a woman a squaw, you’d be damn lucky to get out of there alive...” She, too, remembers being singled out by the insult while going to school in Old Town. “You can’t legislate how people use words, but you can legislate state names. The word has basically been anglicized and used in a hateful manner.”

Ilze Choi <brinumi@earthlink.net> 12/14/99

...the long history of abuse of the Indian people has even involved their language whereby the term *squa* was often used to dishonor Indian women, rendering them fair game for vicious abuse. This is especially true in the West where the word was imported, and, as often as not, used as a derogatory term.

An example of this is the case of Squaw peak located near Phoenix which two 16-year old female Indian students unsuccessfully tried to change in 1997. These two girls... appealed to the Arizona Board on Geographic Names, using documents...which contained research on the origin of the word squaw and how this mountain came to be named Squaw Peak. The documents reveal that Arizona, thousands of miles from the Algonquian homelands, has 70 place names using the word squaw, including disrespectfully...“Squaw Tit” and “Squa Tits.”

On the other hand, the report states neighboring New Mexico has only two such places names. This difference is attributed to the strong Spanish/Mexican presence in New Mexico, while Arizona was settled by people coming from the East who imported the word but often used it with shameful intentions. The original Pima word for Squaw Peak was Kimel O'Otham or Iron Mountain. It was renamed by an archaeologist and engineer Dr. Omar Turney around 1920. The report reveals why Turney chose this name: "When making topographic maps in the U.S. Geological Survey, the writer gave names to several mountains, among them one on the north boundary of the valley which seemed hardly large enough for a full-sized buck mountain, so he named it Squa Peak."

John E. Koontz <Koontz@alpha.bldr.nist.gov> 12/99

It has always been my understanding that 'squaw, ' like most of the Algonquian loan forms in English, is a borrowing from one of the New England Algonquian languages... The derogatory connotation exists only in the English, and as far as I can tell is implicit in the use of a specialized term for a Native American woman or wife. That is, squaw is not an insulting epithet per se, but rather its use reflects as insulting attitude.

I think the loan originates a jargon or trade language used by the early English settlers in New England, the Midlands, and Upper South with their Algonquian neighbors. Later through ignorance or custom, this jargon was used by the English and Americans to deal with more westerly groups, and the Algonquian terms in the jargon became institutionalized even though the native groups were no longer Algonquian speakers.

Donald Soctomah, Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative, guest editorial, 12/99

To the general public, after generations of exposure, the Squaw word was seen as a neutral word, but to Native females this word continues to be a slanderous attack against them and their culture. Incidents occur more often near the Native communities, where the clash between cultures still exists.

When Native people name a geographic feature, such as a river or a mountain, terms are used to describe a specific location for the ease of the traveler or to denote its spiritual significance...The term Squaw was not originally used for place names, because the word did not exist before the 1600's.

It is not a linguist's definition of the original Native word that is of concern. It is the way that the term has been used to define Native women in its current context...It is hard for the general population to imagine how hurtful a word can be unless it is directed at them, their culture or racial background...Being a Native man and the father of 7 daughters, I do not want to see my daughters, or anyone else's daughter, have to carry verbal scars for the rest of their lives...

There is no other word, used today, which hurts Native women, as much as the word Squaw. It has been used as a slanderous assault in hate crimes. Last year a Native woman was brutally assaulted by 2 men, who continually yelled "you dirty Squaw", as they were kicking her. In 1998, there was a high school fight that eventually turned into a racial incident. Native girls were called Squaws; this resulted in death threats being written on the walls.

Sherri Mitchell-Simonds, Penobscot Tribal Member, e-mail, 1/5/00

I personally have never been referred to as a sq--- in a pleasant or respectful way, nor has by mother, grandmother, or any other Native women that I know...to allow the continued use of a term that a majority of Native women find offensive is one of the most aggressively demeaning and demoralizing things that a society can do...

## SHOULD “SQUAW” BE DROPPED FROM PLACE NAMES?

### Agree

Tribal Resolution Signed by All Five Wabanaki Tribal Governments in Maine—  
Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township, Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point  
Penobscot Nation, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, and Aroostook Band of  
Micmac Indians

#### *Recognition of the Year 2000 as the Year of the Native Women and the Removal of the Offensive Term Squaw*

*Whereas;* the Wabanaki of Maine are made up of the Passamaquoddy Tribe, Maliseet Band, Micmac Band, and the Penobscot Nation, and are federally recognized Native Communities in the State of Maine with a membership population of 7300 people, and

*Whereas;* we recognize our existence is based on strength and well-being of our Native Women, and

*Whereas;* our culture and heritage acknowledges Native Women as the cohesive force that is the foundation of family relationships and community alliances, and

*Whereas;* Native Women are the givers of life and their well-being...determines the direction of the next seven generations, and

*Therefore;* we the Wabanaki Native Governments and communities, declare the Year 2000 as the Year of the Native Women and we request the State of Maine and the Federal Government to recognize our declaration, and respect our Native Women and stop the use of demoralizing, dehumanizing terms, which for hundreds of years has been used to subjugate and dismantle the fibers of a healthy Native family and society.

Mike "Steps In It" Walton (e-mail to Maine Governor Angus King) 4/9/99

...In Indian country it [squaw] ranks with the use of “nigger” for African Americans. Neither word is acceptable. It is time to change the way we have been to where we are today, and to be respectful of ALL people of ALL colors. I am sure there would be considerable effort to change names if they were Spic Lake or Mick Mountain or Wop Stream. I am grateful that you are looking into this matter. You have my attention, and the attention of many other indigenous Peoples.

David "Spirit Bear" Walton, reported in *Bangor Daily News*, 5/4/99

David “Spirit Bear” Walton doesn’t move mountains. He just gets them renamed. The Passamaquoddy Indian, who makes his home in Limington, launched a one-man campaign in February to strike the word “squaw” or “squa” from all of Maine’s geographic designations, arguing that the term is offensive to Indian women. On Monday, a state commission on tribal affairs [Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission] agreed with him...

Meanwhile, the man whose letter sparked the entire inquiry into the use of the word “squaw” was elated by the commission’s decision. “Most of the people who know what the word means, whether they’re Indian or not, are probably pretty happy,” said Walton. “when they change it, we can use another Indian word to express our reaction: ‘Ta-ho.’ It means ‘That is the way it should be.’”

Sherri Mitchell-Simonds, Penobscot Tribal Member, reported in *Kennebec Journal*, 11/12/99

Sherri Mitchell...described “squaw” as “a term that has been used by non-native people to degrade native people.” “It would be a considerable slap in the face” if the Legislature refused to erase such derogatory language from the Maine landscape at the dawn of the new millennium, Mitchell said. She said such a move “should be looked at as a hate crime because it truly dishonors native women” by enshrining a term that was “created in Euro-American society” to demean Indian women.

Maine Sunday Telegram Editorial 11/14/99

If “squaw” offends people, the State should drop it. Lawmakers should pass a tribal representative’s bill placing the word on a list of those too offensive to use.

Whether the term “squaw” was offensive from its earliest usage is a matter quite beside the point in the current debate over its use in place names throughout Maine...The relevant truth is that a significant number of Indian people, within Maine and elsewhere, find the word offensive. At the very least, it connotes a stereotype of American Indians that society should be trying to move beyond. The Legislature should take up Soctomah’s bill and pass it. Maine need not offend its Indian population with this term of questionable origin.

Donald Soctomah, Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative, guest editorial, 12/99

As we enter the new millennium, I have hope for a better relationship between the Native population and the State of Maine. In order for us to achieve this improved relationship, we must end 400 years of hurt and discrimination. We must learn to live together peacefully, by honoring and respecting each other. This hope was the motivating factor, when introducing legislation, that would put an end to the use of a demoralizing and dehumanizing term within the State of Maine. This bill would remove the word “Squaw” from place names...This is not an issue of political correctness. It is about basic human decency and respect for one’s fellow citizens. This bill seeks to protect an under-represented group within the state, Native women. Our women, grandmothers, mothers and daughters, all are entitled to protection against basic human rights violations, such as the use of demoralizing language...

This bill sends...a goodwill message of understanding to the Native people of this State. That the State of Maine will stop sanctioning the use of offensive words that dehumanize and exploit the Native people...the following Cheyenne Proverb summarizes the point of this bill concisely: “A Nation is never conquered, until the hearts of its women are on the ground.” Every time this term is used the hearts of our women take another blow.

Ed Snyder, Friends Committee on Maine Public Policy, Bar Harbor 12/9/99

We believe it is important for the Legislature to anticipate problems and try to solve them before they escalate. Fostering good relations between the Indians and the majority population should be a significant priority with legislators. We believe that legislation to add the word “squaw” to the “nigger” in the list of offensive place names in the State is an appropriate way to foster good relations. It is better to act promptly when sensitive issues are raised by Indian leaders rather than let them ferment unattended to. We note that the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, composed of representatives of the State as well as the Indian tribes, has made a similar recommendation.

Sally Sutton, Maine Civil Liberties Union, Portland 1/25/00

...As a society, it is important for us to understand that we are made up of many different cultures. As we develop a better understanding and appreciation of these cultures, it may mean that many of us need to adjust our thinking and correct some actions that may have offended others.

To move forward toward ending discrimination in Maine, it is important that the government we have in place to protect us from discrimination, also take whatever steps are necessary to end any of its own discriminatory practices. If we are now learning that “squaw” is an offensive word to American Indians, then our government should remove it as an official name from the many geographical features that have been identified across the State.

American Indian Movement-Southern California Chapter Web Site

American Indian women and men all around the United States and Canada reject the use of the word squaw in reference to American Indian women. The word has been imposed on our culture by European Americans and appears on hundreds of geographic place names.

Spokane.net - News - racial issues 2/99

“Nothing endures but change,” wrote the Greek philosopher Heracleitus, born in 540 B.C. Throughout the ages, the names of places have changed along with the people themselves. Wars erupted and victors renames the cities they conquered. Explorers discovered ageless peaks, disregarded native names and christened those mountains in honor of their own dead heroes.

Place names have always changed. Now, those which offend American Indians must be altered. In this decade, Indian women want to remove the word “squaw” from the names of American lakes, rivers and mountains. Indeed, it’s time for that word to go...

Let the history books reflect that in the 1990s, civilization progressed. Americans are now discovering that they can heal old wounds by enlarging their capacity for empathy. With the change of these names, we do not alter our past but instead improve our future.

## Disagree

Jim Confalone, reported in *Bangor Daily News*, 5/4/99

Jim Confalone, owner of the Squaw Mountain Resort in Greenville...has vowed he will never change the name of the well-known ski area he owns. “We’re not about to succumb to something like this,” Confalone said Monday from his office in Coconut Grove, Florida. “If they want to picket the whole place, great. Let ‘em.” [Note: The legislation would not change the name of a privately owned business.]

Marge Bruchac, Abenaki Missisquoy Band, VT <mbruchac@javanet.com> 8/31, 9/14 & 11/18/99 e-mails

If we eliminate the word squaw from the English language, we presume to legislate usage of traditional Native languages that contain words that Europeans misused...As a Native woman and a historian, I am deeply suspicious of how modern political attitudes are sometimes applied to the past without careful consideration of the real nature of cultural exchange...I don’t mind one bit being called a squaw, as long as the speaker understands that it originated not in some ignorant swear word, but in a marvelously descriptive indigenous language...I respectfully suggest that we reclaim the understanding and original definitions before we ban the use of any words from any indigenous language. Too much already has been lost in the conflict between cultures.

...We must not become so brainwashed by late 20th century definitions that we allow a neutral, descriptive word, one of thousands that have been incorporated into the English language, to be banned from usage. To ban indigenous words from use in the English tongue guts English as we know it and discriminates against Native people and their languages. Are we to be condemned to speaking only the “King’s English?”...

During the contact period, northeastern Native people taught white people the use of the word squaw, and those whites incorporated it into their language so they could speak clearly to other Natives, in order to specify Native women, not to shame them. If a non-Algonkian woman wishes to be labeled by another term in her Native tongue, that is her choice, but a native Algonkian speaker would still identify her as a squaw, *nunksqua*, *sunksqua*, *squassis*, or some other variant of the word squaw. No disrespect is intended. It is unfortunate that during a certain period of time the word was used as an insult. But, to use an old Dutch phrase, "let's not throw out the baby with the bath water." If the water - the meaning of the word in some minds - is dirty, let us work together to make it clean again, instead of declaring that any Algonkian word - especially the only word that means woman - is to be thrown out of the English language...

Every place name that has the word squaw in it was named such for a very particular reason --and many of them were to honor particular Indian women, or events, or places that women did traditional activities--and without a very good understanding of those reasons, it is a mistake to erase those stories from the landscape...

We cannot continue to allow colonial attitudes to tell us what our words mean. Every time we accept their definitions, we accept that they have the power to decide. My suggestion is to do what the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women in Edmonton, Alberta has done with the term *esquao*, which is the northern linguistic equivalent of the New England Algonkian *skwa* or *squa* - they have reclaimed it, insisting that it will no longer be tolerated as an insult, but will be recognized as a term of honor and respect, as a word of our original language...Imagine the power, and the opportunity to educate the next time someone tries to insult you by calling you a squaw, if you are able to stand proudly and say:

*I do not accept your definition of that word in English. Among my people, women are honored and respected. The word squaw is OUR word for woman, and it is NOT to be used by you or anyone else as an insult! Every time I hear the word, I will remember the voices of the ancestors who taught the Europeans to speak our language, and in their honor I ask you to use that language only with respect.*

As for the place names, perhaps a more useful resolution would be one that acknowledges the imprint of indigenous women and indigenous languages through the survival of these names on the landscape, and declares that this word will not long be tolerated as an insult, but will be restored to its original respectful meaning. If we take it away, we also take away the lives, stories, and voices of the women whose presence was acknowledged by the original naming.